THE DIZZINESS OF FREEDOM
Galatians 5:1-10
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"For freedom Christ has set us free." If you shut your eyes and conjured up mental images associated with the word "freedom" what would they be? The Emancipation of slaves, the Statue of Liberty, the poling place on election day, or perhaps an eagle soaring or a young child on a swing? Can you imagine what it must have been like to be in a concentration camp and then one day to learn that you were free, the locks knocked off, gates open? William Stringfellow suggested one time that that experience is a good metaphor for the experience of hearing the Gospel - a new and radical freedom. The word freedom is full of power, perhaps more so than any other. It is also full of difficulty and paradox.

Freedom is that delicious ambiance of the first day or two of vacation when it seems like the time stretched out ahead is practically endless, just before the burden of time slipping away begins again. Freedom is a brief and fleeting experience that comes when one has completed a job, fought a good fight, run a good race, just before the imminence of the next job, fight, or race becomes apparent. It is a powerful word: a paradoxical word and almost everybody has had something to say about it.

"Let freedom ring" - Samuel Francis Smith wrote in a hymn in 1831. At the heart of the American Revolution was an almost mystical commitment to freedom. Liberty was seen in the 18th century as a mythic goddess, doing battle with forces of autocracy and oppression. We love the Statue of Liberty standing majestically in the harbor, even though the liberty it represents is not the priority for us it once was. We are not interested in the "tired and poor" - when they are fleeing from governments we approve and support.

It is a powerful word and it has inspired much eloquence. "We and all others who believe as we do would rather die on our feet than live on our knees." Franklin D. Roosevelt said during the Second World War and for the ideal of freedom Americans have consistently showed an incredible willingness to sacrifice and die.

But it is also a paradoxical word. Freedom of expression is very near the essence of the American experience, but it is not an absolute freedom. It does not include the right, a landmark case determined, to "shout fire in a crowded theater". We are not free to drive down Broad Street at 80 mph, nor are we free to park for more than 60 minutes downtown, an abridgement of my personal freedom which has, upon occasion, become expensive for me.

Some social science has always challenged the very notion of freedom. Sigmund Freud taught that we are not as free as we thought we were. A few years ago B. F. Skinner wrote Beyond Freedom and Dignity, which became a very controversial book because it argued, academically, that freedom of will is an illusion: we are controlled by other factors, such as the environment, or other people, and that's that. Skinner made few friends in humanist or Christian circles with that kind of thinking, but his book was widely read, and it stimulated vigorous debate.

He goes on to suggest that God could have warned us of danger through ways other than pain. He suggests a doorbell to notify us, or neon tubes in the middle of the forehead. But what of a God who creates pain?

Humor, while necessary for comic relief in life, can't hide the human misery which suffering can bring. Elie Wiesel, young boy in Auschwitz, writes of his death camp experience in a memoir titled Night. With his discovery of evil and suffering he questions the possibility of the existence of God. He tells of one episode in horror:

"I witnessed other hangings. I never saw a single one of the victims weep. (But) to hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips.

"Three victims mounted together into the chairs. The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses. 'Long live liberty!' cried the two adults. But the child was silent. 'Where is God?' someone behind me asked. At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over. Total silence throughout the camp.

"Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. But the third rope was still moving; being so light the child was still alive. Behind me I heard the same man asking: 'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice within me answer him: 'Where is He? Here He is--He is hanging here on this gallows...'"

Dorothy Soelle, a German theologian, asked whose side God was on in the concentration camps, the murderers side or the victims side? Soelle, in her book Suffering, suggests that "the most important question we can ask about suffering is whom it serves. Does our suffering serve good or evil, the cause of becoming alive or being morally paralyzed? Soelle's emphasis is not on "from where does suffering come," but on "where does it lead?"

The questions become more difficult. They move from identifying suffering as something "out there" - to our more personal response. If we ask, where does suffering lead, we must then ask ourselves, "why do we close our eyes and pretend we do not hear and see those who suffer? Can we even face our own suffering? When the aspiring writer in the movie Sophie's Choice begins to get to know the pain of Sophie and Nathan he says for all of us, "I longed to pack my bags and escape."

The disciples in the story of the epileptic responded rather typically to the tragic situations. They didn't seem to be in touch with what the father and son were experiencing. They hadn't made the hopeless rounds from doctor to doctor and medication to medication. They didn't live with the constant worry that the son would burn or drown himself. Instead they asked Jesus "Why couldn't we heal him?" Their concern was for themselves and their failing performance.

And so Paul wrote them a strong letter,a sometimes angry letter. Galatians has been called the Magna Charta of Christian freedom. "You are free." Paul told them. "In Jesus Christ you are free from trying to earn God's love by following rules. God won't love you any more if you fast, pray twenty times a day, or submit to any rite. If you elect to do any of these things, do them out of gratitude for God's love.

The Christian concern with freedom of all types begins here, with Paul's theological insight that God's love for his creation makes people free from the responsibility of trying to earn that love. In fact, the more Paul thought about it, the more those efforts - which are largely religious, looked like a form of never-ending bondage. How can you ever know that you have done enough good things to cause God to love you?

In fact, the more Paul thought about it, the more freedom seemed to be at the center of our humanity - one of God's greatest gifts, part of our essential humanity Jesus Christ came to restore. "For freedom Christ has set you free" he said.

And so, at our best, we Christians have put a priority on freedom. We have, at our best, lived very uncomfortably with totalitarianism of the right or the left. Dictators - whether they speak Spanish or Polish - cannot abide for long in institutions which values liberty.

It is so vsery fragile - this liberty which makes us human. And no one ever treated the topic more eloquently than Dostoevsky in the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor in The Brothers Karamazov. It takes place in 16th century Spain. Hundreds of heretics have been burned and Jesus comes to town, mingles among the people, is recognized by them, and the Grand Inquisitor arrests him. That night in prison they talk. The Inquisitor says:

> "For fifteen centuries we have been wrestling with our freedom but now it is ended and over for good.....People don't want freedom, they want security" the Inquisitor tells Jesus. "I tell thee that man is tormented by no greater anxiety than to find someone quickly to whom he can hand over the gift of freedom with which the ill-fated creature is born."

Thus the great novelist anticipates the tremendous appeal of all the totalitarian structures of human history from Fascism to Sect religion. Their strength is precisely their denial of freedom; in the case of sects-type religion, the virtual elimination of the freedom to think and reason.

The God of the bible is always on the side of freedom. The very earliest images of God in the Bible are as liberator. Before Israel knew Jahweh as the creator, he was known as the one who brought us out of bondage. God in the Bible is always on the side of freedom, always liberating people from whatever inhibits, oppresses, imprisons them.

A modern historian, Robert McElvaine, says most history is written from the top down, not from the bottom up. His special concern is for the "forgotten people" of FDR's depression. McElvaine has set about to listen to these people through letters they had written to President Roosevelt and his wife. We can imagine hearing the same words from Cleveland or Detroit or Columbus.

One letter said rather eloquently, "Why does everything have exceptional value. Except the human being--why are we reduced to poverty and starving and anxiety and sorrow?"

A 12 year old boy writes FDR: "My father he staying home. An all the time crying because he can't find work. I told him why are you crying daddy, and daddy said why shouldn't I cry when there is nothing in the house." In contrast is the one who wrote Roosevelt saying, "Let each one paddle their own canoe, or sink."

The story of the healing of the epileptic is more significant when one considers the larger message. The incident is told to help explain the mystery of the passion story. Neither the disciples nor we can understand the words, "The Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him and he will be raised on the third day."

The entire story of Jesus's passion, his journey to Jerusalem and the cross is in a sense a narrative about suffering. It is a story of blood, sweat, tears, personal denial and abandonment by those he loved best. After Jesus heals the boy he predicts his fateful end to his disciples. But we must not miss the significance of the epileptic boy. The passion story is also a story about love. To be compassionate--to be full of passion--is to view a suffering or deficient person as a cherished fellow human being. To heal, to free, to give sight to each particular individual was the larger task of Jesus. The story tells of a God who cares enough for each of us to enter our suffering.

We can remain caught in the questions of how a loving God could allow this suffering or why an all powerful God will allow evil in the world. But to do so, leads nowhere.

The life of Jesus Christ points to the answer. The discovery of Christ implies the discovery of the redeeming presence of God within the anguish of human experience. He tells of a God who cares passionately for each one who cries, "My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me," and each one who comes pleading, "Lord have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly."

Christian religion is not a turning from each other, but a turning toward each other. It is not a freeing from suffering, but a willingness to care for those who suffer. It is not enough for us to set back and smugly point to the seeming indifference of government bureaucracies. It is to become involved in the lives of those who line Long Street and Livingston Avenue. It is to see the loss of hope in their eyes and their hunger for healing. It is to take our faith which is as small as a mustard seed, and to become passionately concerned for those who suffer. It is not enough for us to say as did the disciples, "Why could we not cast it out?"